The Report Committee for Travis Hunter Measley
Certifies that this is the approved version of the following report:

The Collapse of the Texas A&M Bonfire and the Media Aftermath

APPROVED BY
SUPERVISING COMMITTEE:

Supervisor:

George Sylvie

Mark Morrison

The Collapse of the Texas A&M Bonfire and the Media Aftermath

by

Travis Measley, B.B.A.

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Dedication

This report is dedicated to the 12 young men and women who died in the collapse of the Texas A&M Bonfire. You will never be forgotten.

Abstract

The Collapse of the Texas A&M Bonfire and the Media Aftermath

Travis Hunter Measley, Journalism, MA

The University of Texas at Austin, 2011

Supervisor: George Sylvie

This report is an in-depth analysis of the media coverage of the 1999 collapse of the Texas A&M Bonfire. The report also provides insight, through extensive interviews with journalists involved in the coverage, of how reporters handle the personal emotions associated with tragedy reporting. Through the interviews, I paint a picture of what it was like to arrive on the scene in College Station on Nov. 19, 1999 and detail some of the different strategies and philosophies journalists used to cover the event. The final part of the report is dedicated to exploring the relationship between media and communities in tragedy. The Bonfire collapse and the Columbine school shootings in Littleton, Colo., serve as case studies to analyze the effect of media on a community and vice versa. To conclude, the report attempts to paint a picture of the reality of the Bonfire coverage – its difficulties, its successes and, in some areas, where the media failed.

Table of Contents

It was about 20 minutes before 3 a.m. Nov. 18, 1999. Fifty or so students at Texas A&M University in College Station, Texas, were hard at work building a 60-foot wedding-cake style bonfire that was to burn a week later before the annual Texas A&M vs. University of Texas football game. Many of the younger students were working hard on the ground or lower tiers, locking in thousand-pound logs with giant steel cables while some of the upper classmen worked to secure the smaller logs higher on the stack, some 30 and 40 feet off the ground. Everything was on schedule, and the 91st Aggie Bonfire was set to be the largest in school history.

But at 2:42 a.m., things started to unravel. Without warning, the bonfire collapsed, sending more than 100 logs to the ground and taking more than 30 students with them. The entire collapse happened in fewer than 30 seconds, but in the end 12 students were dead and 27 more were seriously injured.

As the sun rose the next morning, the slow and arduous task of removing the logs – one, by one – from the stack had begun. And as the processes crawled on, more and more bodies were uncovered – some seriously injured but alive, some not. The entire campus and community was in motion as thousands of students, faculty and College Station residents flooded the scene to provide any aide they could.

But elsewhere, across the state and the country, another arduous task had begun – the media coverage. By 9 that morning, the first television trucks from the local Bryan-College Station media had started to gather around the site and journalists from across Texas and the country began to descend on the Texas A&M campus.

Over the next two weeks, the local, state and national media shouldered the burden of explaining to the public exactly what caused one of the most horrific tragedies in collegiate history and trying to discern who was to blame. All the while, the media faced the unique challenge of trying to describing the culture and spirit of Texas A&M, so aptly described by a former student in the 1920s as "from the outside looking in you can't understand it, and from the inside looking out you can't explain it."

Every so often, a tragedy occurs with effects that reverberate beyond the event's locale. These flashpoint events – the Oklahoma City bombing, the Aggie Bonfire collapse, the shootings at Columbine, 9/11 – draw world-wide attention and demand constant and lengthy media coverage. The coverage is emotional. It's also in-depth, expansive and often reveals the true nature of a community, organization or culture.

The coverage, however, also can be abrasive. It can be traumatizing. And it can create a polarizing divide between the media and the community.

In covering the collapse of the Texas A&M Bonfire, the media faced many of the problems that arise when covering a traumatic event. After the first few days of the initial coverage, the media's next step was less clear. Questions had to be answered. Who was to blame for the collapse? How could the university allow students to be in charge of such a seemingly dangerous project? Should we have seen this coming? Were basic safety precautions ignored?

These questions, however, were not easily answered. The tradition of Bonfire, passed down verbally from year to year, was shrouded in mystery and ambiguity. It was

deeply tied to the culture of the university itself, which, in itself, was difficult to understand, let alone explain. As the weeks went by and the media waited for an official report on the collapse, speculation and rumors began to emerge. Was alcohol involved? Did the students violate school rules? Did they cut corners?

While the media grappled with answering these questions, the A&M community dealt with having their traditions and culture analyzed under a microscope by the entire country. And all the while the media were there, making phone calls, knocking on doors and asking questions, driving a wedge between journalists and the university.

In the Bonfire coverage, the media turned out to be only as good as what was right in front of its face. The easy questions were answered, but the more difficult ones, the ones requiring the deeper investigations into the uncomfortable truths, were left scattered and unattended to across the collapse site. The media got their answers, almost six months later, in the form of an official investigative report into the cause of the collapse conducted by a panel of outside engineers. But by then, the answers were too late. For whatever reasons, the media failed to come to their own educated conclusions as to what caused the terrible tragedy. University officials and students waged a war of words in the media against dissenters who proclaimed the Bonfire tradition as "completely and irresponsibly unsafe." But the truth beneath the he-said-she-said back-and-forth was left relatively untouched. It was as if the emotion and scope of the tragedy hindered the state and local media from preforming their true duty – finding the truth.

While ignoring the emotional turmoil inside can be devastating for a journalist, letting it cloud the mind is a true failure.

Texas A&M University was founded in 1876 as a public land-grant college and the first public institution of higher learning in the state. It was originally named Texas Agricultural and Mechanical College, and was an all-male military school that grew to become nationally recognized by the 1940s for its programs in agriculture, engineering and military science. During World War II, TAMC sent more officers to the war than the U.S. Military Academy and the U.S. Naval Academy combined. In the 1960s, under the leadership of University President Major General Earl Rudder, the university began admitting students without requirement of joining the military program (known to this day as the Corps of Cadets) and allowed women to enroll as full-time students for the first time. In 1963, the school was officially renamed Texas A&M University, and over the next four decades, enrollment went from 14,000 to around 48,000. By the turn of the century, Texas A&M was one of the top 10 largest universities, by campus enrollment numbers, in the country.

Aggie Bonfire was initiated in 1909 as a group of students gathered together scraps from around campus and burned them before the football game against archrival the University of Texas. The building and burning of Aggie Bonfire quickly became one of the cornerstone traditions at A&M, as every fall students came together to cut down trees and set them in the form of a bonfire to burn in November. The bonfire symbolizes each and every Aggies' "burning desire" to beat Texas in the schools' football game.

Bonfire was designed, prepared for and built completely by students, with plans and instructions passed down orally from year to year. While that fact was something of pride for the student body, it has been debated as if the lack of professional influence in the later years contributed to the bonfire's downfall.

At the height of its popularity, Aggie Bonfire drew upwards of 70,000 people who would gather on the fields in the northeast corner of campus to watch the stack burn and to sing the "Aggie War Hymn" and the "Spirit of Aggieland" with the Aggie marching band.

When the bonfire fell, the university spun into turmoil. Then-President Ray Bowen immediately tasked an investigation committee to determine the cause of the collapse, but its official report would not be filed for a full six months. In the meantime, rumors of alcohol use during construction, harsh treatment of underclassmen and female workers and a general ignorant attitude toward safety at the building site swirled around the state, in and out of the media.

The committee – which consisted of some of the nation's top engineering experts, none of whom had ties to Texas A&M – released the final report May 2, 2000. The commission declared the tragedy to be a result of structural failure and a loss of containment strength around the first level of the stack. The wires holding the logs together, the commission found, were not nearly strong enough to maintain the structural integrity of such a large structure. Also, the absence of the "first-stack restraining cables" which are traditionally been wrapped around the first tier of the stack, decreased the

strength of the structure. At the time of the collapse, the restraining cables had not been installed – they were scheduled to add later in the week.

The committee also pointed to four behavioral factors that contributed, more indirectly, to the stack's collapse: inadequate student knowledge and skill pertaining to construction; no formal, written plans or "construction methodology:" a cultural bias among students that impeded the identification and resolution of structural risks; and the lack of detailed plan between the university and students to manage the inherent risks associated with the Bonfire's construction.

In its conclusion, the commission stated that "the 1999 collapse [was] neither a 1999 problem, nor a 1999 student leadership problem, nor a 1999 administration problem." Instead, a pattern of flawed organizational behavior existing for decades finally resulted in the accidental collapse.

"No single factor caused the collapse," the commission wrote, "just as no single change will ensure that a tragedy like this never happens again."

In the aftermath, students, former student and even parents of some of the Aggies who died in the collapse went public with their desire to continue the tradition of Bonfire. In June 2000, a month after the commission released its report, President Bowen announced that bonfire would return to campus, but after a two-year moratorium and under the close supervision of professional engineers. However, after failing to develop a satisfactory safety plan and facing increasing costs – including massive liability insurance – President Bowen cancelled the 2002 bonfire.

In August 2002, former Central Intelligence Agency Director Robert Gates succeeded Bowen as A&M's president. Because of lawsuits filed by the families of the victims of the tragedy, Gates decided to indefinitely suspend Aggie Bonfire.

Six wrongful death and personal injury lawsuits were filed against the A&M administration, including President Bowen, Vice President of Student Affairs J. Malon Southerland, the student leaders of the 1999 bonfire and the university. The suits alleged A&M administration limited its supervision of the tradition's design and construction to avoid legal liability for any accident.

The plaintiffs pointed to accidental death and dismemberment insurance policies obtained by the university and a $2 million liability insurance policy issued in 1996 as evidence university officials knew the serious risks the bonfire tradition posed to students.

Throughout the 2000s, most of the 64 defendants had their lawsuits dismissed, but a few settled out of court for a combined sum of around $6.5 million.

In 2004, a memorial was constructed around the site to honor those who died in the accident. More than 10,000 people gathered at the memorial at 2:42 a.m. on Nov. 18, 2004, standing silently in a circle around a small plaque in the ground that marks where the center pole of the 1999 Bonfire was placed. With its opening, the Bonfire Memorial served not only as a proud homage to those who lost their lives in furthering one of A&M's greatest traditions, but also as a silent statement that Bonfire would never again burn on campus

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When you pick up the newspaper in the morning, or pull up a news website on your iPad or Blackberry, you can easily get lost in the images of death and destruction gracing the front pages of many papers. War, tragedy, death, bloodshed – the things that go bump in the night – play out in front of us in newspapers, magazines and television on a daily basis. Communities fall apart before our eyes while enjoy our morning coffee or a beer and a TV dinner after work.

In the days following the collapse of the A&M Bonfire, media outlets stretching from the local Bryan-College Station Eagle to Tom Brokaw and NBC Nightly News committed their coverage to the collapse. Hundreds of reporters from every major newspaper in the state of Texas, as well as the New York Times, the Los Angeles Time, the Washington Post and other national media outlets flooded College Station, setting up camp for days, even weeks. Looking for the blood. Waiting for the community to fall apart. Most of them seasoned veterans, each in search for emotion, looking to uncover the truth, but forced to answer questions themselves.

How can you capture the raw emotion and grief that had taken hold of the community? How do you explain that the event that killed 12 students was, until that morning, one of the founding traditions of the university? How do you make readers understand a university that still was considered by many to be filled with backwoods ideas, extreme conservatism and a lingering lack of diversity and racism? Who is to blame in all of this, and is it worth even pointing the finger to begin with? And can you

capture the emotion, pain surrounding the tragedy without succumbing to the pain yourself?

San Antonio Express News veteran reporter Roy Bragg arrived on the scene the afternoon after the collapse, and spent some time alone at the site late that night.

"Walking up [to the accident site] in the dark; the whole campus was dark. Everything was dark, dark like I've never seen it before. I could just hear people in the darkness, crying. You could just hear them crying," Bragg said. "I almost stepped on a woman who was kneeling in the mud, crying. That kind of got to me."

That week, the Texas A&M community was forced to accommodate and deal with media contingent that had not ever been seen in College Station. A university that prided itself on being somewhat of a cultural mystery for decades was, in its darkest hour, suddenly on display for the world to see

It was just after dawn when then-*Dallas Morning News* reporter Bill Minutaglio got a call from his editor telling him to wake up, drop everything and head to College Station to cover the collapse. Minutaglio was stationed in the *Morning News'* Austin bureau, so he was one of the first reporters to arrive from the major Texas newspapers.

"Driving in [to College Station], I was thinking 'This is just another breaking news disaster story I was going to file as quickly as possible' because I had done this stuff before, I had covered the disasters," Minutaglio said. "And I felt like I knew a little bit about the school because I'd seen it a time or two in the past while writing a story. But not this, not like this. I was utterly unprepared for what I saw when I got there."

When he reached the scene, Minutaglio's brain went into what he calls "journalistic autopilot" as he sought out community leaders, stunned students and university officials around the Bonfire site. He then decided to leave the Bonfire site and post up at a local church, relying on the notion that in a place such as College Station, in the heart of conservative Texas, the religious community would serve as a major crutch in a time such as this. His experience as a Texas journalist taught him that in small towns, people often rely on religion in times of tragedy.

"To be honest…I knew that I would probably need to get close to a religious figure in some way, and maybe go to a church. You just knew that you had to go to the church, you had to go to the church, you had to go to the church…as cynical as that sounds."

The image itself, of the dark, twisted logs – laying on their sides – as rescue workers did their best to free students trapped inside – but still visible, was a chilling image for many of the journalists on the scene.

"It made me feel… it was very dark. I mean the logs, it was just this dark presence," Minutaglio said. "It didn't look good; it looked like it had been air-lifted from somewhere else, somewhere horrible, and put there…it felt like something bad in a very sensualized way occurred right there. People died right there and you just knew it."

The *San Antonio Express-News'* Brent Zwerneman, who covers Aggie sports for the *Express-News* and the *Houston Chronicle,* was dispatched to College Station around the same time as Minutaglio. From 1995-1999, Zwerneman covered the Aggies for the

Bryan-College Station Eagle, and his bosses at the *Express-News* knew that he was familiar with the university and the culture of the community. He also had covered various aspects of Aggie Bonfire each year while working at the *Eagle.*

He arrived a daybreak and headed to the traditional site as he had done countless times before.

"…(sigh) You know, it's something that every time I drive back [passed the former Bonfire site], I look over there and that scene is still etched in my mind, as it will always be, of the collapsed pile and what was going on in that whole scene – that unbelievable and unbelievably sad scene," he said. "It's forever etched in my mind."

Zwerneman paused only momentarily at the site, deciding the crowded field, filled with stunned students and equally stunned reporters, was not the place he needed (or wanted) to be. With experience covering Aggie football, Zwerneman headed to Kyle Field where the football team was attempting to practice.

"You could tell they weren't emotionally invested in the practice," he said. "So they kind of gathered around and were like, 'What can we do to help,' and they just headed over to the site. And because you have all these guys who are 250 pounds and muscle, they were actually very helpful to the process of removing the logs."

Zwerneman was one of the first reporters to tackle the coverage from the athletic side, speaking to Head Coach R.C. Slocum, various players and then-Athletic Director Wally Groff. Zwerneman's story, which ran Nov. 19, coupled with Associated Press photographer Eric Gray's picture of a group of football players carrying a log off the

stack, became one of the most iconic pieces of the entire span of the media coverage. In the piece, Aggie offensive lineman Semisi Heimuli explains the team came to the Bonfire site because the students trapped "are our brothers and sisters. We came to help our fellow Aggies." That quote gave insight into the depth of pain that affected the entire university and Aggie community. It showed that at a school of almost 50,000 students, the bond among them was unparalleled.

Zwerneman also was the first to report that the annual rivalry football game against the University of Texas would not be canceled.

All the major Texas newspapers, and many across the country (including *The New York Times*, *The Chicago Tribune*, *USA TODAY*, *The Washington Post* and *The Los Angeles Times*), had full pages devoted to the coverage with full-color photos and multiple stories. On Nov. 19, the *Dallas Morning News* had five articles encompassing its Bonfire coverage. The next day, that number jumped to 20. The Friday edition of the *Houston Chronicle* displayed nine stories in the first-day collapse coverage.

Reporters who were not assigned to make the trip to College Station spent hours on the phone, doing rewrites and collecting dispatches from journalists in the field.

The *Austin American-Statesman's* Patrick Beach was one of the reporters who arrived in the newsroom mid-Thursday morning to piece together what was coming in from College Station. Beach said he arrived that morning with every intention of enjoying a normal day and going through his normal routine. The newsroom, however, was anything but normal.

"It was a really tough thing to do, because I'm sitting there trying to do all these rewrites but at the same time trying to do my own reporting, all the while the story is changing and evolving from hour to hour," Beach said. As rescue workers removed the logs, the injury and death count continued to change, and would not be finalized until the final student died in the hospital nearly 24 hours later.

"On top of that," Beach said, "I was going through a crash-course in the history and traditions of A&M because my knowledge of the school was limited."

The complexity of the culture and element of "unknown" surrounding Texas A&M at the time created a unique challenge for many of the journalists who covered the Bonfire collapse. Few journalists across the state were A&M graduates – the university had a journalism degree at the time (it was dissolved in 2004), but at a school with "Agriculture" and "Mechanics" in the title, the liberal arts major weren't the most popular. Most journalists in Texas were graduating from the University of Texas. Couple the lack of journalism graduates with the fact that the Bryan-College Station was – and still is – a relatively small media market, and you have a university with detailed intricacies that much of the Texas media know little of.

"There are a lot of traditions peculiar to A&M and a lot of them were complete mysteries to me," Beach said. For example, the Texas A&M mascot, a female collie named Reveille, is the highest-ranking member of the university's Corps of Cadets as a Cadet General. Upon her death, each Reveille is buried outside the north end zone of the

A&M football stadium, with a view of the south end zone scoreboard so that she may always know the score during Aggie football games.

Beach and others relied heavily on the few Aggies scattered across the newsrooms in Texas, asking questions about the difficult-to-understand tradition of Bonfire, how it operated and its meaning. Aggie former student such as the *Statesman's* feature's copy editor Sue Owen also served as proverbial "editorial advisors," debunking myths about the Bonfire.

"People were assuming, as the week went on, that, you know, 'Why are these kids out there at two in the morning? Oh, they must be drunk'; 'oh, they're Aggies, they must be drunk,'…You know, 'who the hell let them do this? Why is it so big and how did anybody not know that it would fall?'" Owen said.

For Owen, the tragedy was more than she was prepared to handle. An A&M graduate in the early 1990s who worked on Aggie Bonfire for four years, Owen said she was stricken by uncontrollable grief at the news of the collapse. Texas A&M prides itself on creating a bond between its former and current students unlike any other university in the world. Each Aggie, current or former student, considers every other Aggie a brother or sister, and shares with each of them a deep sense of camaraderie and loyalty, even if they have never met. The death of an Aggie is more than the death of another student – it is the death of a family member. For Owen, being that she herself had been part of the Bonfire organization during her time at school, the severity of the collapse took an even greater toll.

"I was a train wreck all morning, and for the most of the day I was mostly useless," she said. "Seeing pictures come in from the site, seeing places where I had been just five years earlier, knowing the pain the entire university was going through…it was horrifying."

Despite the emotional turmoil, Owen served as a one of the primary advisors to the entire news staff for much of that week, educating them on the history and inner workings of Bonfire and doing her best to ensure that everything that went into the paper was accurate and fair. While Owen said she could understand how the first reaction would be to scrutinize the judgment of the students and university in undertaking such a task, she was vocal in explaining that Bonfire had been constructed for almost 100 years and was, historically, a safe and organized process.

Later that afternoon, one of the managing editors called her in to his office to discuss what position the paper's editorial board was to take on the tragedy.

She was speechless. And furious.

"What the fuck kind of position are you gonna take?!?! People died and that's bad?"

She said the editorial board wanted to write a column about the lack of oversight and supervision throughout the Bonfire's building. Only a few hours after the collapse, the cause of the tragedy had not been investigated, and there were rumors swirling throughout the media that alcohol and a general disregard for safety lead directly to the stack's collapse.

"I can remember just staring at them, tears streaming down my face, looking at the pictures spread out on the table…I said, 'They are still pulling bodies out of the stack, can't all this wait?'" Owen said.

And they agreed, keeping any staff-generated editorial content related to the Bonfire out of the paper for days.

In times of tragedy, community members, emergency medical crews, police officers and firefighters are all vulnerable to the symptoms of post-Traumatic stress disorder. Journalists are as well. Research from Columbia University's Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma shows that journalists often perceive their own emotions during a tragic event as a weakness, but such emotions are an expected reaction and should be embraced and dealt with through professional debriefings and peer-to-peer conversations.

That research cited *The Oklahoman* staff writer Penny Owen, who noted that what she and her fellow staffers needed after covering the Oklahoma City bombing was "time with fellow journalists, to talk through all the things that happened." But, she added, "By the time we slowed down, everyone was so tired of the bombing that we never really got [to] have that big hashing out session."

The Bonfire collapse had a marked effect on many journalists. While the intricacies of Texas A&M and the Bonfire tradition were shrouded in mystery, for those who covered the university, Bonfire was a uniquely special event. Its collapse was a true shock.

"That's the only night in my life I've never slept a wink [after covering the first day after the collapse]," Zwerneman said. "I just sat on a friend's couch that I was staying with and just sat there the rest of the night just kind of taking it all in, exactly what had happened that day."

While not a former Aggie student, Zwerneman spent years covering the Aggies and A&M for the local paper and married a former Aggie student. He said he had developed a fondness for the school and the town and was very knowledgeable of its intricacies. He had covered minor accidents during past Bonfires, but nothing of the magnitude of the 1999 collapse. It was as if members of his family had passed. But the next morning, Zwerneman was back to work. He refused to ignore his own emotions, but also refused to let them affect the job he had to do and the stories he had to write.

Over the next few days, after the initial coverage passed, state newspapers had the delicate task of sifting through the emotional wreckage left behind. Stories in all the major Texas newspapers celebrated the lives (and covered the memorials) of the 12 victims who died in the collapse. Displayed in the media, the university, Aggie former student and the community turned inward, giving their full support to the students, the administration and the Bonfire tradition.

The university was quoted as vowing to never allow an accident of that magnitude to happen again, but also proclaiming the Bonfire tradition would continue. Parents of the students who were injured or killed told media outlets they were appalled at the suggestion of a lawsuit and that they fully supported A&M and Aggie Bonfire.

However, soon the media were forced to turn their focus toward reporting on the possible causes and digging up any past events that may have pointed to the collapse. An article in *USA TODAY* touched on the "minimal professional oversight" during the building of the structure and questioned just how many miniscule errors of judgment that were passed down over the decades might have contributed to the collapse.

On Nov. 24, the *Austin American-Statesman* ran a front page story paraphrasing a university official, claiming Bonfire student leaders broke university safety rules by forcing freshmen and sophomores to work on the top tiers of the stack.

Pulitzer Prize-winning political cartoonist Steven Benson published a cartoon in the *Arizona Republic* that compared the Bonfire tragedy to the burning of the Branch Dividian compound in Waco and the Klu Klux Klan cross-burnings in Jasper, Texas. Outraged at the ignorance of the cartoon, more than 2,000 Aggie students and former student called the newspaper and sent scathing e-mails to the paper, forcing the publication to pull the cartoon from the Internet.

The day after the Bonfire collapse, *Dallas Morning News* reporter Peter Slover chronicled a slew of past accidents associated with the Bonfire. In the late 1980s, Slover found, between 55 and 85 students were treated for moderate injuries suffered working on Bonfire each year. He also discovered that the university had a "TAMU Aggie Bonfire Accident Medical Policy" that covered any injuries, deaths or dismemberments that could occur on the Bonfire. The discovery raised questions as how aware of the safety risks the university was regarding the Bonfire.

While the media investigation into the history of the Bonfire and the possible causes of its collapse was inevitable, the tragedy resonated among journalists, caught between doing their jobs and trying to avoid piling on more pain to a community. The question: How much was too much?

"Unfortunately, we have to continue to investigate, to a point," said *Express-News* reporter Bragg, an Aggie alum. "There were so many past incidents with Bonfire, albeit minor in comparison, that we were almost forced to dig deeper. Sure, each minor injury, in isolation, is less of a big deal, but when you put them all together…it can't help but look bad."

According to *then-Dallas Morning News* reporter Minutaglio, the media was completely within their right – and their duty – to hold students and university officials accountable for the safety issues and the perceived lack of proper guidance. Sensitivity to the issue at hand was always on his mind, and those of others, he assumed, during the investigations, but such a big story in such an iconic state made ignoring the details impossible. However, the best way to conduct a successful investigation was to be properly educated on A&M and its traditions.

"I think you really have to factor in history, tradition, culture and context," Minutaglio said. "You have to understand history and context, especially at a place such as Texas A&M. If you just came and said, 'Wow, let's just start drilling down and investigating the safety of this,' without understanding the historical context, you'd be foolish and you'd be a really bad reporter.

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Stories such as the A&M Bonfire never end. After the initial reporting, the deeper investigations, the emotional profiles and the step-back, full effect pieces follow. But even after the media circus disperses, after the phones stop ringing with such consistent ferocity, the story still isn't over. Because it isn't forgotten. It lives on long after the event itself, playing out into perpetuity in the pages and archives of newspapers and TV stations. It constantly resurfaces when a new bit of information is discovered, opening old wounds.

Dr. Maxwell McCombs, a University of Texas expert in the study of media agenda-setting and public opinion, believes that journalists often hold to a story for too long, sensationalizing every detail, flushing every angle, regardless of relevancy. The drive to be first to discover some critical piece of information can cloud a reporter's judgment. The problem, he said, is that often times no thought is given the subjects of the story. The problem is, "Once you pitch something out there – yeah, you can retract or correct – but once something is out there, it doesn't ever go away."

"So those temptations have always been there for journalists to overdramatize the news," McCombs said. "When you're dealing with emotional things – the bonfire, for example – that's a very emotional topic that will engage the attention of many people. So, yeah, it becomes very tempting for any little odd new angle you can come up with to over-dramatize it throw it out there."

In certain instances of prolonged coverage of severely traumatic events, public perception of the media's coverage can change as time goes on. In situations such as the Aggie Bonfire collapse or the school shootings at Columbine High school, after days and weeks of constant pressure and questioning from the media, the community attitude may go from relatively open to completely closed off and frustrated.

It did not take long in College Station before a sense of unease began to creep through the community. After weeks of headlines and news stories and television broadcasts shining light on every detail of the collapse, reporters said they could feel the tides begin to change. What Zwerneman, Bragg and Minutaglio originally felt was a clamoring for knowledge and information from the community turned toward a harsh disdain for the media. During the first few days of the coverage, while the community was eager to find out what happened, how many students had died and how the university would react, Bragg said it was fairly easy to speak to student leaders, university officials and people in the community. But weeks later, after the memorial services were finished and the football game had passed, journalists found it much more difficult to get information.

"You could feel it coming in almost every portion of the community," Bragg said. "Instead of talking to people at A&M, we were handed press releases. Students stopped wanting to talk. You could tell people in the community were more than annoyed we were still around asking questions."

A community turning on the media is not a new idea, especially in tension-filled circumstances. Wanda Cash, the associate director of the University of Texas journalism school, said that as coverage goes on, community's patience and tolerance of media presence and expose wans. Cash, the former editor and publisher of *The Baytown Sun* and a 25-year veteran of community journalism, said that the community can quickly become exhausted by the amount of media coverage and focus on their town.

"When you are talking about weeks or months of covering an event in a single location, [media fatigue] is a fact all journalists have to deal with," Cash said. "The story can be the most important issue in the world, but after a while…after a while people get tired of the story. They get tired of the questions and the cameras and seeing their names in the paper."

Journalists such as Cash and Bragg don't view media fatigue as an excuse to quit, however. It is simply a part of the long-term reporting process. The story doesn't end when the people get tired of talking. The reporter's job is to ask the questions that no one else will, and to continue to chase a story regardless of the resistance. The coverage presses on, Cash said. When a lead dissolves, others are revealed in investigated.

"[Journalists] know this is going to happen," Bragg said. "We plan on it, we have different strategies in place and alternate angles to pursue when the community throws up road blocks."

During the Bonfire coverage, Bragg said the editors and staff members at the *Express-News* held meetings to discuss exactly what they were going to do when the

"media fatigue" set in. Looking back, Bragg said they pinpointed ahead of time almost the exact moment when the change would occur, and had come up with potential story ideas and sources for that time.

In the aftermath of the April 20, 1999 school shootings at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colo., a very venomous, almost sinister relationship developed between the local and national media and the people of Littleton. Often times, as was the case with Columbine, the coverage – its inaccuracies and choice of topics – can spark a revolt against the media.

"Regarding Columbine, the community became unhappy with the media because they seemed to be playing up certain aspects of the community that they knew not to be the case or a distorted emphasis on sensationalism or violent aspects of the community," said Dr. Stephen Reese, the associate dean of academic affairs for the UT journalism school and a past director of the school.

Reese, one of the world's foremost experts on media content and the framing of public issues, said the mix of objectives and motivations among the different levels of media can give off the sense that reporters are trying to paint a community in a negative light. That is not often the case, however.

In the wake of Columbine, the lack of brevity in the media coverage and the choice photos and headlines used in papers such as the *Denver Post* and the *Denver Rocky Mountain News* outraged the Littleton community. Various blatantly inaccurate reports, including fatality numbers as high as 25 (12 students and one faculty member

were murdered), and the shooters' alleged involvement with the "Trenchcoat Mafia," further fueled the fire.

Members of the community spoke out, calling much of the media coverage "inaccurate at best and lies at worst." And they were right.

"The Trenchcoat Mafia was not even a real thing," said Roger O'Neil of NBC News during an interview on the 2001 documentary *Covering Columbine*. "To this day people still think the shooters were part of this group, when they weren't. And we reported it, we absolutely did. And we were wrong, just completely wrong."

In the documentary, reporters from the local and national news discuss how quickly the community shut them out amidst false reports. Months after the event, a story in *Time Magazine* contained quotes from Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold – the two shooters – taken from security tapes that police had given to the media but not to the public. The first time Harris' and Klebold's parents learned of what their sons were saying and thinking during the massacre was when they read the *Time* piece.

During the Texas A&M tragedy, similar situations occurred. Rumors of heavy drinking and a complete disregard for safety swirled around the collapse. *The Dallas Morning News, Austin American-Statesman* and *The Houston Chronicle* published stories containing quotes or paraphrases from then-A&M professor Larry Grosse, who claimed that key structural safeguards were blindly ignored during the 1999 construction. Students and university officials, however, were consistent in saying that the building process, and safety measures, were no different than those of the past decades. Those

same three newspapers also printed stories that alcohol was found at the Bonfire site and that two of the students who died had a blood alcohol content of over .08. However, none of the stories dig into whether or not the alcohol had any effect on the collapse. It was not until eight months later, with the release of the official investigation finding, were the rumors of alcohol and gross negligence toward safety were debunked.

According to Cash, successfully covering a small community depends on trust.

"It's a long process, building that trust with a community, and in a blink of an eye you can destroy that trust with an inaccuracies or failing to verify your sources," Cash said.

It's a phenomenon Cash describes as "death by 1,000 cuts." Each inaccuracy in reporting, each individually incorrect detail, is like a small cut. On its own, it may not be a problem. But when the small inaccuracies begin to pile up, the result can be a catastrophic destruction of the media-community relationship. In the case of Aggie Bonfire, the media began to lose the trust they built up by failing to discover the actual truth about the collapse. The back-and-forth between men such as Grosse (others would speak out as well in the months after the Bonfire collapse) and university officials brought the public no closer to knowing what really happened. The Aggie community wanted to believe the collapse was a freak accident, that no one was at fault, but they were given nothing else to point to. When the report finally came out six months later, saying that the collapse was the product of years of bad habits and not any isolated incidents in 1999, there was timid vindication. But Grosse had not been too far from the

truth as well – there were safety issues that plagued the building of the Bonfire, and the university had not been as diligent in their monitoring of the construction as it should have been.

During Columbine, the media became *part* of the story. Their presence and actions altered the way the coverage played out. Community leaders, officials and students in the Columbine school district gathered together, tired of media following them home, knocking on their doors and harassing them at work, and reached out to the media, begging them to use discretion regarding specific topics and announcing their refusal to talk about certain aspects of the shootings. Before the one-year anniversary of the Columbine shootings, students and administrators at Columbine High School held a large-scale question-and-answer session for the media that would serve as the only time they would answer any questions on the subject. Their actions dictated what went in to the newspaper coverage. Without sacrificing truth, the Littleton community made an agreement with the media over what they would and would not talk about. While in no way comparing the tragedy at Columbine to the Aggie Bonfire collapse, both stories, both communities, were forever altered.

Bragg, a reporter for the *San Antonio Express News,* who has covered Texas A&M in some capacity for more than a decade, said he thinks the Bonfire collapse served as a type of turning point for the culture and attitude of Texas A&M in the eyes of the media

"At the time, I think [Bonfire] was the beginning of the change," Bragg said. "For decades, people always perceived A&M as the backwards, redneck place that was behind the times and culturally intolerant. For the most part that was untrue, but no one at the university ever made any attempts to reach out and explain exactly what A&M was all about. It's like they were proud to be incorrectly pegged."

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, *Texas Monthly Magazine* mocked A&M on a yearly basis in their "Bum Steer Awards." Designed to highlight outrageous events, people and organizations in Texas during the year, A&M seemed to end up on the "Bum" list every year. Whether for an odd tradition (the burial of the Reveille dogs) or an ill-advised way to save money (for one year, the school stopped stocking student dorms with toilet paper), the magazine was never short on ways to poke fun at Aggies.

However, Bragg feels the school has been given a break during the last decade by the media. As for the reason why, Bragg said he isn't sure.

"Maybe the times are changing. Maybe A&M is losing some of its old-time ways. Maybe its becoming more transparent…I'm not sure. It just feels different."

It is impossible, as a journalist, to become entrenched within an institution or a community and not then become an agent of how that community is shaped. Coverage dictates opinion and knowledge. Headlines, phrases and even single words frame not only the media's view or agenda on an event, but the publics' as well. The idea that media can observe from above the fray with objectivity and without influence is a myth.

Don Corrigan, a journalism professor at Webster University in St. Louis and long-time community journalist, wrote in a study on community crime coverage, that media members, especially those in small communities, have the obligation to show sensitivity to the local community when reporting on a tragedy. Corrigan said that it may mean waiting a few hours or even overnight before releasing names or certain facts, but that small gesture goes a long way toward building a relationship with the community.

In his article, Corrigan also made a point echoed by Wanda Cash: local journalists share the grief of the community, because they are part of the community. That emotion can influence the way a story is written, what sources are chosen or what subjects are focused on. Cash, who spent years living and working in Baytown, along the coast southeast of Houston, said the oil refineries that populated the area were a point of contention for the town, and for her as well.

"Waking up every morning, I could see [a refinery] directly out my window," she said. "When we were reporting on pollution or traffic or whatever caused by the refineries, we were also breathing that air and living in that town."

"Did those opinions direct the coverage? Of course it did. I never allowed myself to be a part of the story, but I was still affected by it."

While it is debatable whether the media-community relationship has a positive or negative impact on tragedy coverage, its effect is undeniable. An omnipresent and yet unaffecting expectation of a journalist is unrealistic. A journalist's contribution to coverage has a permanent effect on the community, often times the community that

journalist lives in. The story defines the community, but the community defines the journalist.

"You get defined that way by a story and a setting, and vice versa," Minutaglio said. "The media cannot just cover the story – they become part of the news in very overt ways and even holistic ways."

But, as journalists such as Bragg and Cash would agree, it is paramount that the media look beyond their own emotions and the emotions of the communities they cover in an effort to produce accurate and thorough content. It is human nature to be affected by your environment, as Cash previously mentioned, but to allow that environment to derail or stifle the story is a complete media failure. With emotional tragedies such as the Aggie Bonfire collapse, and, to a certain degree, the Columbine shootings, journalists ultimately failed in finding the truth. The reporting was riddled with small inaccuracies and unanswered questions and media members became caught up in the emotion of their environment. Covering tragedy, especially in small communities, is about establishing trust with the subjects. When that trust is compromised, or is taken for granted, the community and the media suffer.

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